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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to examine the effects of sentence combining instruction on the writing performance of both black students and students from small high schools enrolled in freshman composition classes. Subjects were 56 students enrolled in two sections of freshman composition, with one section receiving practice in sentence combining. The data examined in the study were the first and last compositions written by the students for the course. Two two-way analyses of covariance--race by treatment, and size of high school by treatment--were made on each of the four dependent variables: the holistic rating for overall quality of the compositions, and scores on three factors of syntactic maturity (t-unit length, clause length, and subordination ratio). No significant differences were found in the interaction between race and treatment, and size of high school and treatment on each of the four dependent variables, thereby raising questions about the viability of sentence combining as an adjunct to a rhetorically based approach to teaching freshman composition. (RL)

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A Study of the Effect of Sentence Combining on the Writing of Selected Black Students and Graduates of Small High Schools in University Freshman English Classes

Ellis M. Melder

Amid mounting alarm at student deficiencies in writing, composition teachers have been heartened by recent research in sentence-combining. Studies on the elementary and junior high levels have indicated that sentence-combining may be an effective method of improving student writing. (Miller & Ney, 1967; Mellon, 1969; Fisher, 1973; Perron, 1974; O'Hare, 1973; Combs, 1976; and Pederson, 1977). Within the last decade a number of studies, however, have been less consistent than those reported for studies on lower levels. Ross (1971) reported gains in clause length for one of his two experimental classes. Ney (1974), however, found no significant differences in measures of syntactic maturity. Whereas Waterfall (1977) found a significant difference in overall quality but not in syntactic fluency in the writings of students who had engaged in SC practice, Stewart (1978) reported significant gains in mean words per T-unit and words per clause but not in overall quality. Only the Morenberg, Daiker, and Kerek study (1978) showed significant gains for the experimental group in both measures. Unlike all other studies on the university level, in this study the experimental group concentrated on SC alone as the instructional content of the composition course.

Using material developed by Morenberg, Daiker, and Kerek specifically for college students, the present study sought to test the efficacy

of sentence-combining practice as an adjunct to a university freshman composition course. Furthermore the study examined two variables which have hitherto not been considered on the university level, race and experiential educational background of the students as reflected in the size of high school from which each student came. One level of each of these variables was of specific interest, Black students and those students who had attended small high school for two or more years, i.e., at least half of their secondary school years. These two groups of students often have experiential backgrounds in writing which necessitate more intensive instruction in composition on the college level.

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses, stated in condensed form, were tested at the .05 level of significance.

N.B. The three factors of syntactic maturity tested in these hypotheses were T-unit length, clause length, and subordination ratio.

1. There is no significant difference in syntactic maturity in the writing of university students trained in SC and in that of university students not trained in SC.
2. There is no significant difference in the overall quality of compositions written by university students trained in SC and in that of university students not trained in SC.
3. There is no significant difference in syntactic maturity in the writing of Black university students trained in SC and in that of Black university students not trained in SC.

4. There is no significant difference in the overall quality of compositions written by Black university students trained in SC and in that of Black university students not trained in SC.
5. There is no significant difference in syntactic maturity in the writing of university students, educated in small high schools, who received the SC treatment and in that of university students, educated in small high schools, who did not receive the SC treatment.
6. There is no significant difference in the overall quality of compositions written by university students, educated in small high schools, who received the SC treatment and in that of university students, educated in small high schools, who did not receive the SC treatment.

Design and Sample

This study employed a quasi-experimental design consisting of non-equivalent groups, one experimental and one control, each given a pre-test, treatment, and a post-test (Campbell-Stanley, 1969:47). One independent variable, instructional methods and materials, consisted of the use of SC exercises and the discussion of rhetoric and usage with the experimental group and the discussion of rhetoric, usage, and model essays in a rhetoric text, with the control group. Other independent variables were race and the size of high school which the student attended for two or more years. The dependent variables were (1) the syntactic maturity of the pre-test and post-test composition of each student in the study as measured by three factors: mean T-unit length, mean

clause length, and subordiration ratio and (2) the overall quality of each composition judged by three teacher raters on the basis of ideas, organization, wording, flavor (creativity), usage, punctuation, spelling, and grammar.

The subjects of the present study were 56 students who registered for two sections of English 101 during the fall semester of 1978 at a university in the South. All of these students had an English A.C.T. score between sixteen and twenty-one, the range for students placed in English 101, or had previously passed English 100, the freshman remedial English course. Although random assignment of subjects was not possible, the two groups (control and experimental) approached equivalency. The mean of the A.C.T. English scores for the control group was 16.9 and for the experimental group, 16.3. Each group consisted of twenty-eight students. Among the 28 subjects comprising the control group, six were Black and 22, white. In the experimental group, ten of the 28 were Black and 18, white. In the total sample of 56, 26 subjects attended a small high school. Using the procedure for determining the range of a series of figures, in this study the small high school was designated as one having an enrollment below 744. Sixteen of the subjects in the control group attended small high schools, and 10 in the experimental group were from small high schools.

Procedure

The two sections of English 101 comprising the study met on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, 50 minutes each day for sixteen weeks. One teacher who had ten years of teaching experience, seven on the university

level, taught both sections. Both sections or groups wrote seven in-class compositions during the semester. The first of these compositions was written during the first class period and served as the pre-test. The last composition written during a 2½ hour period was the final examination in the course as well as the post-test for this study. The following topics aimed to elicit a predominantly expository composition were given for the pre-test to both groups:

1. Reasons for the popularity of the movie Star Wars.
2. Contemporary American music.
3. A definition of one of the following words, concepts, or terms.

   "rip-off"

   courage

   a bayou
4. The art of selling (or buying) a used car.
5. But they told me this would be fun.

On the post-test the students were asked to write on one of thirteen argumentative topics such as:

1. Women's athletics should (should not) be further developed.
2. Hunting should (should not) be highly restricted.
3. All students should (should not) take a course in the fine arts.
4. The Argicultural strike.
5. Gambling should (should not) be legalized in Louisiana.

Each of the other five compositions was written in class during three 50-minute class periods so that the teacher could guide and carefully monitor the processes of (1) pre-writing, (2) writing a first draft,

(3) editing and proofreading the first draft, and (4) writing the final draft. During nine of the remaining 15 weeks of the semester the experimental group devoted a maximum of 20 minutes two days a week, Monday and Wednesday, to in-class discussion and practice of SC. The practice of SC in two short, intensive sessions per week rather than one or two 50-minute periods per week reflects the position of William Strong that the "strategy [of sentence combining] is not an end in itself but a means to an end" (1976:61). Sentence combining should thus be considered as an adjunct to a fully articulated composition course which emphasizes well-organized and clearly expressed as well as syntactically effective free writing.

During the class time devoted to SC in the experimental group, the students compared their responses to assigned SC exercises in The Writer's Options: College Sentence Combining. (Daiker, Kerek, and Morenberg, 1978). Using, by permission of the authors, pre-publication copies of this very extensive and thorough text, the students concentrated on exercises assigned from Part One: Structures of that text. Each chapter in this part identifies a particular sentence structure (relative clause, participle, appositive, absolute, prepositional phrase, noun substitute) or a relationship of ideas (subordination, coordination) and provides non-signalled SC exercises for practice in the use of the structure. Basic pattern exercises called for the combining of sets of short sentences or "kernels" to form more complex sentences. Other exercises in each unit presented sets of sentences to be combined and arranged to form paragraphs in an essay. Because of time constraints the experimental

group focused on exercises from Unit 2, Relative Clauses; Unit 3, Participles; Unit 4, Appositives; Unit 8, Subordination; Unit 9 Coordination; and Unit 10, Noun Substitutes. The teacher made much use of the chalkboard and mimeographed copies of student assignments. Through examining and reading aloud their responses, the students were constantly made aware of their options in expressing the ideas in the controlled writing and the rhetorical reasons underlying the most effective choices.

Class time in the control group and the remaining class time in the experimental group was spent in discussing assigned chapters from Design (Flynn and McGuire, 1978) concerning general matters of rhetoric and specific modes of discourse (process analysis, comparison and contrast, classification, definition, analysis, argument). In addition, the control group analyzed essays from Design illustrating the use of particular modes of discourse. Using the Harbrace College Handbook, both groups reviewed usage as the need was reflected in their class compositions written at the same points during the semester.

Instrumentation

The pre-test and post-test compositions of both groups were evaluated in two ways. A syntactic analysis using the factors of mean T-unit length (W/T), mean clause length (W/C), and subordination ratio (C/T) was made. O'Donnell (1976) concluded that T-unit length may be "the most useful and usable indice of syntactic development over a wide age-range" and confirmed earlier findings of Hunt (1965) in stating that clause length is "the best single measure of syntactic complexity at the

high school level and beyond" (p. 38). A second method of evaluation measured the overall quality of the compositions using an adaptation of Paul Diederich's Analytic Scale for Holistic Evaluation (Diedrich, 1974).

The syntactic analysis was performed by two raters both trained in the use of the rules for segmentation of the writing and computation formulas established by Hunt (1964, 1965, 1967, 1970). All discrepancies in scores of the two raters were reconciled by consensus so that one set of scores for each of the 112 compositions was recorded. Thus the reliability co-efficient for each factor of the pre- and post-treatment analyses was computed for a single rater. Pre-and post-test reliability co-efficients for the three factors in the syntactic analysis were: T-unit length (.992, .998), clause length (.994, .997), and subordination ration (.985, .992).

The holistic evaluation of the compositions was made by three English composition teachers. These teacher raters, extensively trained in the use of the analytic scale, devoted three days in the examination of the 112 compositions. These compositions had been typed to remove the variable of handwriting, assigned an identifying number, and, via a system of stratified random sampling, grouped so that at each session the raters evaluated about the same number of pre- and post-treatment, experimental and control group compositions. The raters were thus naïve to the condition of any of the compositions. The scale used in the rating of each paper is given in Table I below.

Insert Table I About Here

Using this scale, each rater assigned one score to each composition. The final score for each composition represented the average of the three raters' scores. Thus the reliability coefficients for pre- and post-treatment evaluations were computed by a formula stated in Winer (1971:287) to arrive at an estimate of reliability for multiple raters. The reliability coefficient for the evaluation of the pre-tests was .65 and for the post-tests, .80.

The difference between the pre-test and post-test reliability coefficients for the holistic evaluation may reflect the wider range of writing ability at pre-test time than at post-test time and thus the uneven quality of the pre-treatment writing. This variability may, in turn, have elicited less uniform responses from the raters than those given to post-treatment writings.

Results of the Study

In this study four dependent variables were examined: three syntactic maturity scores (T-unit length, clause length, and subordination ratio) and the holistic rating score. On each of these variables two two-way analyses of covariance, race by treatment and school size by treatment were made using the .05 level of significance. No significant differences were found from the interaction between the treatment and the variables of race and size of school; thus hypotheses one and two were not rejected. Further, the results of the main effects tests for treatments generalize to Black students in both treatment groups as well as to students from small high schools in the two treatment groups; thus, hypotheses three, four, five, and six were not rejected.

Comparison of the post-test mean scores for the control and the experimental groups with race as the variable revealed no significant differences. White students in the experimental group did attain higher scores on the syntactic maturity factors of T-unit length and clause and also in the holistic evaluations of their writing. The converse, however, was true of the Black students in the study. Black students in the experimental group received lower scores on all ratings except that of subordination ratio. No significant differences were noted in the means of syntactic maturity scores with size of high school as a variable. Holistic evaluation means, however, indicated that those students from both small and large high schools who had the experimental treatment received, on the average, higher holistic ratings than did those students not having SC practice.

Summary

The present study was conducted to further examine the efficacy of practice in sentence combining as an instructional procedure within a university freshman English composition course. The variables examined were race and size of high school. Studies have found differential levels of proficiency in verbal ability of Black and non-black with lower scores reported for Black students. (Coleman, et al., 1966) (On Further Examination, 1977). Furthermore, students from small high schools often experience a less comprehensive English program than students in larger schools, a factor which adversely affects their writing proficiency. Thus more intensive instruction in writing at the university level is indicated for these two groups of students. It was the intent of this

study to evaluate the effect of more intensive practice in writing through sentence combining exercises with these two groups of students.

Two two-way analyses of covariance, race by treatment and size of high school by treatment were made on each of the four dependent variables: the holistic rating for overall quality of compositions, and scores on three factors of syntactic maturity — T-unit length, clause length, and subordination ratio. No significant differences were found in the interaction between race and treatment and size of high school and treatment on each of the four dependent variables. In the absence thereof, the results of the main effects tests generalize to university students on both treatment groups and to Black students in each treatment group as well as to students from small high schools in both groups. Thus none of the research hypotheses of this study were supported.

On the basis of such findings the viability of sentence combining practice as an adjunct to a rhetorically based approach to teaching composition is questionable. Although the mean syntactic maturity scores of the subjects in the experimental group did not decline, the statistically insignificant gains cannot properly be attributed to the sentence combining treatment.

That sentence combining practice can foster a student writer's awareness of rhetorical choices seems apparent in the reports of significant gains in overall quality of essays (O'Hare, 1973; Combs, 1976; Waterfall, 1977; Morenberg, Daiker, & Kerek, 1978). The results of the present study do not support these findings. One possible explanation for the non-significant differences between treatment groups may be

related to the brevity of the in-class time per week and the number of weeks devoted to the experimental treatment. In this study a maximum of 20 minutes, twice a week, was devoted to in-class writing and discussion of SC exercises. Given this time limit, the students concentrated, for the most part, on isolated sets of kernels in an uncued format. Each set was designed to focus on the use of a particular structure, the relative clause, the appositive, or the participle, for example. Longer discourses into which students incorporated sets of basic sentences were written out of class. Insightful discussion of the semantic and rhetorical relationships of sentences within these paragraphs and essays demanded more in-class time than could be allotted. Because of the lack of experience with SC and sometimes with writing in general, the students needed more guidance than time allowed. Furthermore part of the time designated for in-class SC practice and comparison of results had to be devoted to explanation of the syntactic structure to be used in a given unit of exercises. This discussion further reduced the amount of time which the students spent in acutally writing sentences. Thus a longer period of time per week for more weeks of the semester devoted to SC practice may have produced significant differences in favor of the experimental treatment.

Two other factors may account for the lack of significant differences: lack of sharpness between treatments and sample size. The power of the F tests may have been affected by lack of sharpness between treatments. Both groups discussed rhetorical principles and devices as well as particular modes of discourse using the same text. The small sample

size may also have affected the results. Practical considerations, such as control of the teacher variable and time of class meetings of the two treatment groups, demanded that the total sample size be comprised of two composition classes of 62 students. Mortality further reduced the usable sample of 56 with 28 in each treatment group. Further partitioning of each treatment group by, for example, ethnic origin, reduced the number in each cell.

Despite the non-significant findings of this study, it is felt that continued investigation of the practice of SC in freshman composition courses is fitting. Several concerns relative to both SC practice and the writing program as a whole definitely merit further consideration. The particular area of investigation of the use of sentence combining practice at each of the basic steps in the process of writing, i.e., writing, pre-writing, and re-writing to determine which sentence combining activities are most appropriate to each stage may be an especially fruitful study.

Table I

Holistic Rating Scale

Item of Composition	Low		Middle		High
General Merit					
Ideas	2	4	6	8	10
Organization	2	4	6	8	10
Wording	1	2	3	4	5
Flavor (Creativity)	1	2	3	4	5
Mechanics					
Usage	1	2	3	4	5
Punctuation	1	2	3	4	5
Spelling	1	2	3	4	5
Grammar	1	2	3	4	5

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